

**“Can we come out of sin ‘by degrees’?”  
The contribution of Andrew Thomson  
and John Ritchie to the anti-slavery movement  
in Scotland 1820-1840**

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**“The bursting of a bomb”**

On 6 October 1830, according to a report in the *Scotsman*, “as numerous a meeting as could be”, full of the “respectable, enlightened and fashionable” citizens, took place in Edinburgh’s Assembly Rooms.<sup>1</sup> The meeting was organised by the Edinburgh Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Negro Slavery. The lord provost of the city was in the chair and a number of distinguished speakers had already paid tribute to the efforts of those such as William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, and Thomas Clarkson in the anti-slavery campaign, and to William Robertson and Adam Smith in the Scottish Enlightenment’s attitude to slavery. Francis Jeffrey, Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, proposed a motion to petition parliament for the abolition of colonial slavery “at the earliest possible opportunity”, and for legislation that would free all children born of slave parents after January 1831. These resolutions reflected an increasing public impatience with the slow speed of parliamentary action to end slavery, and the need to set a date to begin that process. The motion was seconded by Dr John Ritchie, minister of the United Associate Secession Church’s Potterrow congregation in Edinburgh. The stage was thus set for what would appear to be a unanimous call for the abolition of slavery.<sup>2</sup>

To his feet rose Dr Andrew Thomson, minister of Edinburgh’s St George’s congregation, and acknowledged by many as the leader of the Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland. Andrew Thomson was well known as a supporter of abolition, and had been a long-standing member

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<sup>1</sup> *Scotsman*, 9 Oct. 1830.

<sup>2</sup> *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 12 Oct. 1830.

of the Edinburgh committee. The chairman indicated that he should come up to the platform. William Cousin, a young eye witness who was later to be minister in Duns, described the scene. "It had been observed with amazement," he said, "that Dr Thomson, of all men in the world, was not on the platform. But at last the well known face was seen rising from the body of the hall and was received with acclamation mingled here and there with some slight tokens of disapproval." In response to the lord provost's invitation he responded, "No, my Lord. I cannot come to the platform this time; I am going to speak against your resolutions."<sup>3</sup>

The reaction to this was described as "the bursting of a bomb".<sup>4</sup> Thomson then began what was to be the first of two landmark speeches in the anti-slavery movement, by explaining his position. He described the resolutions as excellent and gave credit to the committee. However his reasons for opposition, he declared, were that they did not go far enough. To argue that abolition should take place "at the earliest possible opportunity", for him, gave leave to the West Indian planters to extend its life indefinitely, and to set a date for the emancipation of children, recognised the legitimacy of their parents' enslavement. He would move to insert the word "immediately" in the resolution. "I am astonished," he said, "that anyone could acquiesce in the premises laid down, or in the soundness of the arguments we have heard, without seeing the necessity of immediate abolition." And according to one report he turned to John Ritchie and "twitted him" by suggesting that if he knew him aright, immediate emancipation would better serve his purpose than the gradual abolition suggested by the resolutions which he had supported.<sup>5</sup>

Another eye witness, Henry Cockburn, the judge and literary figure, saw such a dispute as trivial. In his memoirs Cockburn described the chaotic scene that followed, in which Thomson declared that if abolition meant the shedding of blood, it was a necessary price for ending slavery. The lord provost departed from the chair, with a declaration that as chief magistrate

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<sup>3</sup> Jean. L. Watson, *Life of Dr. Andrew Thomson* (Edinburgh, 1882), 111.

<sup>4</sup> A. McNair, *Rev. Dr. John Ritchie – Kilmarnock Standard*, 25 Oct. 1913 – 3 Oct. 1914; New College Library, Edinburgh (Special Collections), 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

he could not preside over a meeting where such sentiments were expressed and the meeting decided to reconvene on 19 October to petition for immediate abolition. "After all," wrote Cockburn, "the difference was verbal, for *immediate*, as explained, meant only *with all practical speed*, which was exactly what the cautious meant by gradual."<sup>6</sup>

### **From abolition of the slave trade to emancipation**

Was this a matter of semantics or of real substance? To understand this we need to look at the way in which the movement against slavery developed in Scotland. A starting point might be 1778 when a majority of judges in the Court of Session decided that the law of Scotland could not support slavery. Joseph Knight had been brought as a slave from Jamaica to Scotland by Sir John Wedderburn of Ballindean near Perth, and for eight years had sought a determination of his freedom. There is little doubt that Enlightenment thinking and Christian theology played their part in a decision that was to lay the ground for later action, but it was to be another decade before that action started.

The British campaign against the slave trade began in 1787. It was led by William Wilberforce in the House of Commons, and the London Committee started to mobilise public opinion the following year. In 1788 Scotland sent 16 petitions to the House of Commons, mainly from Church of Scotland presbyteries, but in 1792 185 petitions came from Scotland out of a British total of just over 550. In these early stages the campaign was simply aimed at stopping the trade. The abolitionists believed that to cut the supply of slaves to the West Indies would result in a greater care for those slaves in the islands, and therefore slavery would gradually wither away. There was considerable anxiety to separate the issues of the slave trade and slavery itself, and to avoid any impression that the abolitionists were radicals, still less revolutionaries. The one slave rebellion that was to prove ultimately successful had broken out in what is now Haiti in 1791, and the reports of it were ready fuel for those Scots with commercial interests in the trade and in plantation slavery itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time* (Edinburgh, 1856), 468.

In 1792 Henry Dundas, the most powerful Scot in Pitt's government, gave an assurance to parliament that the slave trade would be abolished, but he declined to set a date for that. Abolition finally came in 1808, but after the war with France ended in 1814, the loosening of political sanctions on meetings meant that petitions came in once again seeking a ban on the French trade as part of the peace terms. In the meantime some tentative steps were taken, led by a London Scot, James Stephen, to regulate the plantations through registering the numbers of slaves held there. By 1823, however, there were few signs that the abolitionists' hopes of improvement had been in any way fulfilled, and a new campaign was launched. The Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst, had issued guidelines that year for improving the treatment of slaves, and this tentative spirit was reflected in the titles given to the newly formed abolition committees. "Amelioration" of slavery became the limited objective, seeking to avoid panicking those with West Indian interests who held a great deal of power in parliament. Abolition was the ultimate goal, but it was a far away dream. Edinburgh's newly formed organisation was thus termed "The Society for the Mitigation and Ultimate Abolition of Negro slavery".<sup>7</sup>

The obduracy of the slave-owners in the Caribbean became clear over the remainder of that decade. The frustration of the abolitionists with the lack of progress is seen in some of the contemporary petitions. For example that from *Old Deer and the Surrounding Parishes* in Aberdeenshire in 1828, called for sugar subsidies to be withdrawn, in order not to uphold a system "so injurious to moral feeling and so directly opposed to one of the first principles of Christianity", and sought the ending of slavery, "certainly in a manner compatible with the safety of all concerned", but not at "a far distant time" or "gradually", but at "the earliest period".<sup>8</sup>

By 1830 the word "eventual" was more and more replaced by "gradual" in the Committee titles and the petitions themselves. The British government balked at taking direct action, and although the planters came to see the writing on the wall, they were determined to hang on as long as possi-

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<sup>7</sup> *First Annual Report of the Edinburgh Society for the Mitigation and Ultimate Abolition of Slavery* (Edinburgh, 1824).

<sup>8</sup> *Journals of the House of Lords*, vol. 60, 11 July 1828.



ble. Arguments relating to commercial interests were mixed with dark tales of chaos and bloodshed that would result from premature emancipation, a course for which the slaves themselves, it was alleged, were ill prepared. But by 1830 the extreme cruelty of the system had been well documented, not least by Zachary Macaulay, son of a manse in Inverary and editor of the abolitionists' national journal *The Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*.<sup>9</sup> There was no going back, and the pro-slavery supporters saw that their best hope was to stretch out the time by highlighting the dangers of immediate action.

### **Andrew Thomson and John Ritchie – passion and purpose**

Andrew Thomson's call for immediate abolition was to help break that pattern of unwitting collusion between those who feared losing public and parliamentary support by too radical action, and those in whose interests it was to encourage such fears. This was clearly his purpose in moving against the resolutions. The West Indian proprietors for him had delivered nothing but "professions, deceptions, and deceitful promises".<sup>10</sup> Giving an indication of the grounds on which his antislavery arguments were to rest, he continued by asking "when were the eternal principles of justice and equity to be compromised for maxims of expediency or policy?"<sup>11</sup> It was that priority which led him to light a tinder-box by declaring that he would rather that "a great deal of blood was shed, if necessary, than that 800,000 human beings should continue in hopeless bondage". That was a sentiment that he was to amplify in a second speech on 19 October when he quoted the Latin tag *fiat justitia, riat coelum* (let justice be done whatever the consequences) and opted for "the hurricane" with its temporary violence and rage rather

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<sup>9</sup> *The Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* was the national paper of the campaign against slavery. It was published between 1825 and 1840 and until 1834 was edited by Zachary Macaulay. Most of the material was taken from Caribbean newspapers, government reports and the evidence provided by Macaulay was given in prodigious detail. At the height of the campaign it sold 20,000 copies, many of which were distributed by abolitionist committees whose activities were detailed in the *Reporter*.

<sup>10</sup> *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 9 Oct. 1830.

<sup>11</sup> *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 12 Oct. 1830.

than the “noisome pestilence” which, he proclaimed, “with intolerant and terminable malignity, sends its thousands and tens of thousands of hapless victims into the ever-yawning and never-satisfied grave”.<sup>12</sup>

A casual observer from afar might have concluded from the proceedings at the meeting of 6 October that Andrew Thomson was a firebrand who cared little whom he injured in the process, a radical who almost delighted in alienating others, whose extremism and intemperate outbursts would guarantee him few friends and little respect from those who crossed his path. A similar observer might also conclude that John Ritchie, the seconder of the committee’s motion, was a man of peace and of compromise, willing to take a modest role and a moderate position for the sake of unity, and having moved a resolution regretting any offence caused to the lord provost, perhaps wanted to backtrack on any precipitate action.

Those who knew Thomson and Ritchie better might have formed the exact opposite conclusion. Thomas Chalmers, with whom Thomson often disagreed on theological and biblical matters, preached a memorial sermon in St George’s Church shortly after Thomson’s death, and declared that “whatever may have been his errors” (and Chalmers saw one of these to be a vehemence which led to excesses) “at bottom, truth and piety and ardent philanthropy formed the substratum of a noble and generous nature”.<sup>13</sup> John Ritchie’s chronicler, Professor Alexander McNair, whilst paying tribute to his subject’s ability to co-operate with different public figures in the many causes that he espoused, contrasted this with his regular and severe rifts with his congregation in Edinburgh, and with the presbytery and the synod of his own church, leading to his suspension in 1845 from the presbytery and later to his leaving Potterrow congregation amid considerable bitterness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Substance of the Speech Delivered at the Meeting of the Edinburgh Society for the Abolition of Slavery on October 19, 1830 by Andrew Thomson, D.D. Minister of St. George’s Church* (Edinburgh, 1830), 39. At this meeting the new name of the Society was adopted, reflecting the change in emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Chalmers, *Sermon preached at St. George’s, Edinburgh on 20 February 1830 on the occasion of the death of Rev. Dr. Andrew Thomson* (Glasgow, 1830).

<sup>14</sup> McNair, *Rev. Dr. John Ritchie*, 199–210.

Andrew Thomson's concern for slavery is first evident in 1814 as a member of the committee charged with organising the petition against the French slave trade.<sup>15</sup> Ritchie assured the Edinburgh audience on 6 October that from earliest recollections he had been taught to revere the rights of man and had often asserted them "at the expense of his own peace".<sup>16</sup> In Kilmarnock, where he was minister from 1813 to 1825, he was reputed to have been active in the anti-slavery movement.<sup>17</sup> Kilmarnock residents sent a petition in 1814, but strangely Ritchie's church is not one of the seventeen United Associate congregations that petitioned in 1823. Both men had a reputation for espousing a number of causes. Andrew Thomson held a passion for education and founded a school. He was a leading member of the British and Foreign Bible Society, resigning in 1827 over the hotly contended issue of the inclusion of the Apocrypha by the Society. His love of music led him to compose hymn tunes including "Redemption" and "St George's", and for twenty years he edited the *Christian Instructor*, writing many of the articles himself, and establishing its reputation as the foremost Christian journal in Scotland. John Ritchie was more overtly "political" in his causes, identifying with protest movements against economic distress in Ayrshire (to the horror of some in his congregation) and later on in Edinburgh with the campaigns to extend suffrage and to repeal the Corn Laws. Above all he was active in the Voluntary movement for total separation of church and state. One of his descendants wrote that "politics and religion for him were inseparable".<sup>18</sup>

The large number of interests, involvements and causes espoused by these two men should not lead us to conclude that slavery was simply one in a long list. No other single issue of the time provided such a clear moral stance despite the division over the time-scale, and it called for a particular

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<sup>15</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 2 Jul. 1814.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1830.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Ritchie, "The Life and Political Career of Rev. Dr. John Ritchie (1782-1861), Minister of the United Secession Church, Potterrow, Edinburgh, early-Victorian radical dissenter and activist", M.Sc. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, Aug. 1998, 9-10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

passion and time commitment that was not lacking in either man. When Ritchie seconded the resolutions on 6 October he declared that it was “the duty of every Christian minister to be in the forefront of the battle” [against slavery].<sup>19</sup> It has been suggested, particularly by Duncan Rice, the Aberdeen-born historian of slavery, that the passion for abolition espoused by the Evangelicals reflected their use of slavery as a tool to work out theological concerns and contradictions. Andrew Thomson, he wrote, “moved to an immediatist view on slavery because of his position on personal accountability”.<sup>20</sup> At one level, as we will see, the linking of slavery with sin and guilt formed a vital part of Thomson’s writings and speeches on slavery. But rather than slavery being the anvil on which these concerns were hammered out, theological insights were brought to bear effectively and urgently in the humanitarian cause of abolition.

### **Destroying the “Upas tree” of slavery**

To return to that meeting in Edinburgh on 6 October, after the lord provost left the chair both Thomson and Ritchie were asked to take it, as were a number of those left. All of them declined. Around Andrew Thomson a number of the committee gathered, who pressed to hold another meeting on 19 October. This was to be specifically called for the purpose of the immediate abolition of slavery. Despite the plea for unity made by a Mr Campbell at the end of the meeting on 6 October that “those who would seek immediate abolition should not refuse to petition for eventual abolition”, a contention vigorously opposed by Andrew Thomson, the lines had now been drawn.<sup>21</sup> Two advertisements appeared in the *Scotsman* on 16 October. One was from the “immediatists” on the Committee. It invited all who were sympathetic to immediate emancipation to come to the Assembly Rooms at one o’ clock on 19 October. The other was from other members of the committee, “being of the opinion that it would be unsafe to grant immediate emancipation”. It appealed to the public to sign the original

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<sup>19</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 9 Oct. 1830.

<sup>20</sup> C. Duncan Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1981), 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 9 Oct. 1830.



petition, copies of which would be available in the Council Chamber, the Merchants' House, and eleven shops.<sup>22</sup>

This latter group received public support through a letter in the press from the distinguished phrenologist, George Combe. The reply to this letter was to form an important part of Andrew Thomson's speech at the next meeting. Combe declared himself a strong opponent of slavery, claiming that amongst enlightened men there could be no support for such an institution. Nonetheless for him human imperfection prevented what was obviously a just course being carried out until the slaves were prepared for it. He accused advocates of immediate abolition of subverting West Indian society and "seeking a revolution in the state of property in the colonies". Whilst he admitted that property in human beings sat uneasily with justice, "this justice", he concluded, in the light of human imperfection, was an abstract principle".<sup>23</sup>

The meeting on 19 October was totally dominated by Andrew Thomson's speech which lasted two and a half hours, and which the young William Cousin described in these terms:

I have heard the greatest orations of Chalmers and Candlish and Cunningham and Guthrie, each so different, but, judged by immediate practical effect, in feeling and in act, even from them I have never heard anything superior to that magnificent oration, the greatest and the last, of Dr Andrew Thomson.<sup>24</sup>

It was undoubtedly a majestic mixture of debating technique, theological analysis, and political deconstruction. The leading American historian of slavery, David Brion Davis, described it as a "fire and brimstone speech", which for him provided an ideology for the whole British movement in the final years of campaigning.<sup>25</sup> Through it we can see many of Thomson's

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<sup>22</sup> *Scotsman*, 16 Oct. 1830.

<sup>23</sup> *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 14 Oct. 1830.

<sup>24</sup> Watson, *Life of Dr. Andrew Thomson*, 114.

<sup>25</sup> D. B. Davis, "The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Anti-Slavery Thought", *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIX, no. 2 (Sept. 1962), 221.

ideas that were developed through the editorship of the *Christian Instructor*, and in the one published sermon on the theme of slavery. It has five main themes – the implications of property in human beings; the fallacy of mitigation; the urgency of abandoning the crime of slavery; the concrete nature of justice; and the higher precedence over economic or even safety issues. All were practical, all were controversial, and all were infused with radical theological insights.

Many of the anti-slavery petitions had argued that property could not be held in man and in the most famous English court case on slavery that came before Lord Mansfield, the Scottish born chief justice, in 1772, the crowd in the gallery were reputed to have shouted “no property, no property”.<sup>26</sup> Yet the sanctity of property was a deeply held concept that inhibited many of goodwill from taking too radical a position on slavery. And although slaves ceased to be property by law in Scotland in 1778, they were very much defined in these terms throughout the legal systems of the Caribbean islands. Scots were disproportionately involved in investment in Caribbean slavery, and on the island of Jamaica one third of those who owned or managed plantations came from Scotland. Thomson drew deep on the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers when he declared: “No man is entitled to make himself the slave of another. Still less is he entitled to make a slave of his fellow-creature”.<sup>27</sup> When faced with the inevitable argument that slavery was permitted in the Old Testament, he responded that this was a particular divine warrant of which there has been no evidence in the West Indies. To argue that the permission given to the Israelites to hold slaves had validity in the present was, for him, to argue that because the Israelites under the authority of God went to exterminate the Canaanites, it was legitimate for Britain to attack any country that had not made war against it.<sup>28</sup>

Thomson instanced the way in which Scottish newspapers held advertisements for West Indian properties, in which human beings were listed

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<sup>26</sup> S. Drescher, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 1986), 37.

<sup>27</sup> Thomson, *Substance of the Speech delivered at the meeting of the Edinburgh Society*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

for sale alongside mules, oxen, cows, and other stock.<sup>29</sup> His response to that had been given earlier when he quoted from the view of a slave given by a West Indian commissioner, Mr Dwarris, as “happy, contented, ...thoughtless, careless”. Dwarris, for Thomson, had reduced slaves to the level of beasts, and against that he asserted that any slave “has a soul for which, as for ours, the Saviour died, and which, like ours, is destined for immortality”.<sup>30</sup> That struck at the very basis of slavery, which had for centuries been justified either on simple grounds of genetic racial inferiority, or in a more refined way by classifying blacks as heathens incapable of Christian potential. Montesquieu the French philosopher put it starkly when he wrote cynically: “It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because allowing them to be men a suspicion would follow, that we ourselves are not Christians”.<sup>31</sup> Andrew Thomson grounded not just humanity, but immortality, as the destiny of those who were treated as commodities.

It was another Evangelical insight that led to the second major theme of Thomson’s argument. Enlightened thinkers and Moderate churchmen basically subscribed to the idea of progress in civilisation. Obviously an institution such as slavery was to be condemned as uncivilised. But given education and reform, with plans for mitigation that avoided revolution, it would improve and eventually come to an end. So wrote some of those who warned against radical action, and those who sought to show the planters in the West Indies in a more favourable light.

Thomson’s strong sense of human frailty and sin led him to reject mitigation of slavery on two basic grounds. Firstly, whilst admitting that “many individuals amongst the slave-holders may be distinguished by their consideration and kindness towards the unfortunate beings who are subjected to their authority”. Such absolute power, for Thomson, in the hands of another human being, with all their weakness and moral frailty, “must be abused where it is held and exercised for purposes of aggrandisement, and

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. T. Nugent, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (London, 1752), ii, 342.

where those who are subject to it are continually exposed to its caprices and its resentments”.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the speech Thomson detailed the most terrible examples of wanton cruelty and sadism from slave-owners. It was generally accepted that these “caprices and resentments” were part of a society where the stress of a hostile climate, the constant fear of rebellion, and dissolute life-style marked by excessive drinking and uninhibited sexual gratification for the men, were familiar features for whites. It would be easy to see some kind of a solution to be found in the gradual mitigation of slavery, though the obstinacy of the planters had made that hope more and more remote throughout the 1820s. But for Andrew Thomson, just as the power of slave-owners could not be entrusted to sinful human beings, so a system such as slavery, which held human beings for whom Christ died as property, was evil. And, for him, you could not mitigate or improve evil, or alter its very nature. He readily agreed that some amelioration could be achieved by parliamentary action, by colonial “arrangements”, and by appeals to the planters’ better nature. But “mitigate and keep down the evil,” he said, but the improvements will still be superficial because “you have not reached the seat and vital spring of the mischief”.<sup>33</sup> By characterising slavery as a malignant disease, Andrew Thomson began to reach out to the most radical of his conclusions about slavery, literally going to its foundations. With a flourish he described it as a “sepulchre, full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness”, remaining so, however the sepulchre was whitewashed and adorned with flowers to appear outwardly beautiful. And he then gave a picture which was translated into graphic illustration by later abolitionists in America:

Why, Sir, slavery is the very Upas tree of the moral world, beneath whose pestiferous shade all intellect languishes and all virtue dies. And if you would get quit of the evil, you must go more thoroughly and effectively to work than you can ever do by these palliatives, which are included under the term “mitigation”. The foul sepulchre must be

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<sup>32</sup> Thomson, *Substance of the Speech*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



taken away. The cup of oppression must be dashed to pieces on the ground. The pestiferous tree must be cut down and eradicated; it must be, root and branch of it, cast into the consuming fire, and its ashes scattered to the four winds of heaven. It is thus that you must deal with slavery. You must annihilate it, – annihilate it now, – and annihilate it for ever.<sup>34</sup>

### Coming out of sin “by degrees”

The timescale provided the third of Thomson’s themes in that speech on the necessity for immediate abolition. Not only did he argue that mitigation enabled the slave-owners to make slavery more acceptable, and hence to stretch out its lifetime indefinitely, but more powerfully he attacked the tactics of delay with theological tools. In an appendix to his published sermon he argued that it was on the grounds that slavery is condemned by religion, “or in other words is immoral”, that it must be immediately and totally abolished.<sup>35</sup> In this later speech Thomson spelt it out more starkly by stating that “slavery is a crime; that to engage in it or persist in it is to contract guilt in the sight of heaven”. Consequently for him:

We are bound to make no delay in hastening out of the transgression and putting an end to it, wherever it has obtained a foothold in our dominions. To say that we will come out of sin by degrees – that we will only forsake it slowly and step by step – that we will pause and hesitate and look well around us before we consent to abandon its gains and pleasures ... that we will postpone the duty of “doing justly and loving mercy,” till we have removed every petty difficulty out of the way, and got all the conflicting interests that are involved in the measure reconciled or satisfied; – to say this is to trample on the demands of moral obligation, and to disregard the voice that speaks to us from heaven. The path of duty is plain before us; and we have nothing

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> A. Thomson, “Slavery not Sanctioned, but Condemned by Christianity”, in *Sermons on various subjects; by Andrew Thomson D. D. Minister of St. George’s Church, Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1829).

to do but to enter it at once, and to walk in it without turning to the right hand or to the left. . . . God reigns over his universe in the exercise of infinite perfection: he commands us to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke.<sup>36</sup>

This uncompromising immediatism could only come out of a strong conviction of the magnitude of sin, but rather than being a hostage to the doctrine of sin, such doctrine was applied to the concrete situation. For Thomson that is in conflict with George Combe's idea of justice as an abstract concept. In the published sermon he argued that "Scripture considers slavery as a great and essential evil, and liberty as a great and essential good". He continued by asserting that the sacred writers and Jesus himself used these concepts not as similes, but metaphors, to ground them and give emphasis to the truth that they conveyed.<sup>37</sup> In the speech, Thomson suggested that Mr Combe's view came from the West Indies, where a Mr Hinds in Barbados declared, in defence of slavery, that "all the evils of slavery are abstract, and that all its blessings are positive". "Is the application of the cart-whip to the slave's bare back an abstract evil?" Thomson asked. And he continued "that we should obey the will of the Almighty and not continue to do what he has forbidden, is not an abstract principle – it is a concrete principle, for ever dwelling in the Christian's mind, pressing upon his conscience, and influencing his conduct". For Andrew Thomson the views of Mr Combe "would lay every moral obligation at the feet of worldly expediency".<sup>38</sup>

Worldly expediency for Andrew Thomson was nothing compared with divine instruction. The much vaunted threat of economic loss he regarded as spurious, not least because of the loss of the lives of soldiers and sailors in the West Indies defending the system, and he was totally opposed to the current plans being mooted to compensate the slave owners in the event of emancipation, one that he regarded as rewarding crime and theft, a theme taken up in some of the later petitions. In the last part of his speech Andrew Thomson took up the topic which had most annoyed his opponents – whether

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<sup>36</sup> Thomson, *Substance of the Speech*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Thomson, "Slavery not Sanctioned", 3.

<sup>38</sup> Thomson, *Substance of the Speech*, 28.

he was prepared to risk massive violence in the cause. He made it clear that the predictions of insurrection and bloodshed were horrors dangled before abolitionists by the West Indian community to blunt or delay justice. "But if you push me," said Thomson, "and still urge the argument ... I repeat that maxim, taken from a heathen book, but pervading the whole Book of God, *Fiat justitia, – ruat coelum*. Righteousness, Sir, is the pillar of the universe. Break down that pillar and the universe falls into ruin and desolation." "If there must be violence, let it come. Give me the hurricane rather than the pestilence."<sup>39</sup> Henry Cockburn's comment that "Thomson and his friends carried everything their way" was evidenced by the enthusiasm generated by this speech which in turn led to signatures for a petition exceeding 25,000 whilst those for gradual abolition gathered only 1,000.<sup>40</sup>

Where was John Ritchie at this point? After all he had seconded the "gradualist" resolutions and had asked Thomson to withdraw his amendment. He then apologised on behalf of the committee for any discourtesy to the lord provost, an act whose necessity Andrew Thomson deemed unnecessary. On 19 October he entered the Assembly Rooms alongside Andrew Thomson and sat next to him on the platform. He moved a congratulatory resolution at the end of Thomson's speech, and used it to explain his change of position. He had been willing previously, he said, to take the lesser good when the greater could not be obtained, but now "when he saw that 20/- in place of 10/- in the pound had been offered" he needed to accept the larger sum. For all his constant appearances on platforms of all causes Ritchie was not renowned at a great orator, and it showed in this speech. He proceeded with a rather obscure point about having "schoolmasters" on the throne of Britain and France, continued with the growth of enlightenment, and then proceeded to argue about Paul's attitude to Philemon, before stating that immediate emancipation would benefit planters and the British public alike.<sup>41</sup> All in all it represented for him not so much a shift, but an awakening. This he credited to Andrew Thomson, already a friend and

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 Nov. 1830.

<sup>41</sup> *The Scotsman*, 20 Oct. 1830.

colleague in the anti-Apocryphal controversy, and for whom he felt in his own words “an admiration only short of idolatry”.<sup>42</sup>

### **Beyond October 1830**

Both men were to remain active in the new Edinburgh Society for the Abolition of Negro Slavery. For Andrew Thomson this activity lasted less than four months until his death. But he made two important contributions to its work. Before the close of the 19 October meeting he moved successfully that a Ladies Association be formed, and nominated the members. Ladies Associations were to play an increasing role in the anti-slavery movement, and had already made an impact in the campaign to boycott slave-grown sugar. Wilberforce was strongly averse to the role of women in the campaign, but Thomson had the insight to appreciate the need and value of their involvement.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, Thomson took the opportunity to advance the cause of abolition in the courts of the Church of Scotland. Throughout the 1820s the strong lead given by presbyteries of the Kirk on abolition of the slave trade had not been replicated, with only six presbyteries and synods petitioning and three congregations. By contrast sixty petitions came from the Associate Secession Church over that period.<sup>44</sup> On 9 November 1830 the Synod of Lothian agreed to petition both houses of parliament “to adopt without delay such measures as in their wisdom they may deem requisite for effectually securing the abolition and extinction of slavery”. This was moved by Andrew Thomson and carried by twenty-three votes to seven. The counter motion to adopt a safer gradualist approach was moved by Dr John Inglis of Old Greyfriars, Edinburgh, and he and two others recorded their dissent.<sup>45</sup>

There is no doubt that Thomson’s leadership in the 1830s debates led to a renewed enthusiasm for petitioning in the Kirk and in the land. Public meetings were held in Aberdeen, Paisley, Perth, Kelso and Glasgow, re-

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<sup>42</sup> McNair, “Rev. Dr. Andrew Ritchie”, 68.

<sup>43</sup> *The Scotsman*, 20 Oct. 1830.

<sup>44</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons; Journals of the House of Lords*, 1823-1828.

<sup>45</sup> NAS, CH2/256/16, Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale, Minutes, 4/5 May 1830.



sulting in a large number of signatures. Eleven Church of Scotland presbyteries and synods petitioned, from Cairston in Orkney to Lorne in the west, from Tain to Dunfermline. Zachary Macaulay in an editorial in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* in January 1831 observed with great satisfaction “that this cause has been advocated by ministers of religion in that country [Scotland], both of the established church and other denominations”, and that “the clergy had come forward prominently at this important conjuncture, to instruct and arouse the people under their charge to petition the legislature”.<sup>46</sup>

Macaulay went on to observe that “it is both justice to notice that the United Synod of the Scottish Secession Church, representing upwards of three hundred congregations, led the way, as a religious body, in this work of justice and mercy”.<sup>47</sup> At the 1823 Synod of the United Associate Secession Church a correspondent to the *Glasgow Chronicle* noted a fervent description of “the horrors of the system in all its bearings”, by two of its ministers. One of them was John Ritchie. In 1830 Ritchie was moderator of the United Associate Secession Church’s Synod and one month before the Edinburgh meetings on slavery had presided over the synod’s meeting in Broughton Place Church. On 16 September synod unanimously resolved to petition parliament and to recommend to all its congregations that they should follow suit. Ritchie, although moderator, had been convenor of a committee charged two days previously with the task of preparing the petitions. As a result of this no less than 120 petitions from the United Associate Secession Church were sent to the House of Commons and 107 to the House of Lords, far outstripping those sent from public meetings or gatherings of citizens.<sup>48</sup>

### **Opposition, attack, and response**

In April 1831 however, a complaint was brought against John Ritchie at the meeting of his Church’s synod. Mr Kay of Kinross declared that it had

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<sup>46</sup> *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, iv, no. 2, Jan. 1831, 26-39.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons*, vol. 86, part 1, 1830; *Journals of The House of Lords*, vol. 63, 1830-1.

been agreed that all congregations should petition [bizarrely he said “against the slave trade”] but no meeting of the committee which was charged with the task of circulating the resolutions, had taken place. Dr Ritchie, he claimed, had been so anxious to see the immediate abolition of slavery “that he transmitted the resolutions of the Anti-Slavery Society by the post, by coaches, in short in every possible way, to members of the Court, the whole of which were printed before he received the minutes of the Synod”.<sup>49</sup> It was hardly surprising that some in the synod were keen to catch Ritchie out on such a point – many would have reservations over his new enthusiasm for immediate abolition, and many others clearly disapproved of what they regarded as yet another unauthorised, precipitate, and radical action. When votes were called for on a motion of censure, he escaped it by three votes, sixty-nine to sixty-six. *The Scotsman* reported that the announcement “elicited a cheer from the spectators in the gallery, but it was instantly checked by the Moderator”.<sup>50</sup> Once again perhaps an indication that Ritchie’s support was more abundant outside his church than within it.

Andrew Thomson, for all the respect in which he was held, was far from immune from savage attack. James McQueen, former editor of the *Glasgow Courier*, which represented the cause of West Indian planters and merchants, wrote to the *Courier* in 1830 in which he associated Dr Patrick Macfarlane, minister of St Enoch’s in Glasgow, a previous correspondent and known abolitionist with “such bloodthirsty and firebrand interpreters [of scripture] as Dr A. Thomson, the new patron you court”.<sup>51</sup> From the West Indies came a report of discussion in the Jamaican Assembly in 1832. One member there stated of the Scottish missionaries: “They are leagued with our enemies, are our worst enemies. We denounce them to the country and call on those who have estates to beware how they permit men, evidently under the late talented Dr Thomson of Edinburgh, to instruct and preach to our slaves”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *The Scotsman*, 20 April 1831.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Glasgow Courier*, 30 Nov. 1830.

<sup>52</sup> Hope. M. Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa* (London, 1863), 76.

Long before the 1830 meetings Andrew Thomson had ensured that the *Christian Instructor* was a vehicle for the critical awareness of slavery and its effects. It may well be that it was an anonymous correspondent to the *Instructor* who had a significant influence on him. In 1817 Thomson wrote in the journal that "immediate emancipation would be a measure fraught with greater cruelty and folly than can easily be calculated".<sup>53</sup> There is no evidence that this view was modified until "M." wrote an impassioned letter to the *Instructor* in August 1826 entitled "Immediate Abolition of Slavery the Duty of Christians". The theological approach, not least the quoting of "fiat justicia", was so close to the pattern of Thomson's speech in 1830 that it is tempting to think that this was the moment of truth for him.<sup>54</sup>

Thomson's last writing for the *Instructor* was a critical review of the newly published *Letters on the West Indian Question*, by Henry Duncan, minister of Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire. Dr Duncan, later to be moderator of the Kirk's General Assembly, proclaimed his desire for emancipation "from an early age", but he could neither agree that slavery was sin, nor that amelioration had been ineffective. For Duncan the planters had now changed and "far from being tyrants, are rapidly becoming the benevolent protectors of slaves". He recommended non-interference by the British government in the affairs of the West Indies.<sup>55</sup> It was hardly surprising that the published letters by Duncan addressed to the Colonial Secretary were enthusiastically seized on and used by the Glasgow West India Committee, for all he proclaimed his anti-slavery credentials. Thomson responded in the January 1831 *Christian Instructor*. He reminded Duncan that his critique of the immediatists' emotional fervour sat uneasily with a man who had made a fervent speech to "break up and frustrate" an abolitionist meeting in Dumfries some months ago.<sup>56</sup> Thomson saw Duncan's arguments as

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<sup>53</sup> *The Christian Instructor*, vol. xiv, no. v. March 1817, 327.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 1826, 533-538.

<sup>55</sup> H. Duncan, *Presbyter's Letters on the West Indian Question addressed to the Rt. Hon. George Murray, G.C.B. M.P. Colonial Secretary by Henry Duncan D.D. Ruthwell* (London, 1830), 57.

<sup>56</sup> *Christian Instructor*, Jan. 1831, 54.

informed “by the maxims of secular expediency”, and those that were informed by religion led to “so much bad theology” and “so many misinterpretations of scripture”. And he could not agree with Duncan’s refusal to condemn planters and slave-owners as sinners. “They have been buyers or receivers of stolen goods”, he proclaimed. “The essence of the sin”, he wrote, was “every successive hour that they [the slaves] are held and deprived of their natural liberty”.<sup>57</sup> Within the month Andrew Thomson collapsed and died outside his home. Duncan delayed his response until the end of March out of respect for the memory of his “much valued and deeply lamented friend, by whose ardent, sensitive and uncompromising mind the critic was indicted”.<sup>58</sup>

### **John Ritchie continues in the cause**

It would be easy to see the mantle of Andrew Thomson falling on John Ritchie and perhaps that was how the latter saw it. Ritchie remained consistently active in the cause until after the mid-1840s when he was involved in the “Send back the money” campaign to persuade Free Church leaders to return donations from Scottish slave-owners in the southern States of America. Ritchie was instrumental in the United Associate Secessionist Synod’s petitioning in 1833. He encouraged congregations in 1838 to seek the end of the apprenticeship scheme which followed Colonial Emancipation and which many saw as slavery by another name. In the final pressure for emancipation it was Ritchie who chaired the debates between the London abolitionist agent, George Thomson, and the West Indian’s advocate, Peter Borthwick, the MP for Evesham. Ritchie moved the resolutions at crucial meetings of the Edinburgh Abolition Society, and he was one of three delegates from the capital who attended the great Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1833.

Three months after colonial emancipation was secured in July 1833, John Ritchie chaired the meeting to inaugurate the Edinburgh Emancipation Society, dedicated to the abolition of slavery throughout the world. It was followed by what was to become the much more influential Glasgow

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<sup>57</sup> *Christian Instructor*, Jan. 1831, 64.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1831, 259.



Society in whose minutes Ritchie also finds a mention, moving a resolution at its second annual meeting in 1836.<sup>59</sup> His activity in the cause seemed to be unlimited. In February 1836 he shared platforms with George Thompson and once more moved the resolutions in the Edinburgh Committee in 1838, on the ending of negro apprenticeship. In April 1840 L'Institute d'Afrique, the French successor to the abolitionist organisation Les Amis des Noirs, made him an Honorary Vice-President.

### **Scottish anti-slavery debt to Andrew Thomson and John Ritchie**

On Ritchie's death in 1861 Dr Bruce of Newmilns spoke of his "kind, merciful, philanthropic spirit that made him grieve for the injuries done to the Negro", and claimed that "with a power and a pathos rarely equalled, he denounced the iniquitous conduct of the planter and held it up to scorn".<sup>60</sup> Much of that cannot be gainsaid. His passion and commitment were undeniable. The length of his service to the abolition cause was outstanding, and after being wrong footed over gradual abolition in 1830 he was never wanting in espousing the most radical of positions. In fact this radicalism was seen in a published sermon commenting on slavery as one of the "foulest blots" on the national landscape during the reign of George IV. In that sermon we can recognise the heaviest of brickbats – against the legislature for allowing it to continue, against those who suggest that slave-owners should be compensated for their loss, terming the continuation of slavery as "treason" against Britain and against human nature.<sup>61</sup> It is strong stuff. But it is long on polemic and short on argument and theology. Compared with Andrew Thomson's sermons and speeches, it is a very poor second.

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<sup>59</sup> Mitchell Library Glasgow, Minutes of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, Mic.891503, reel.2, 1 March, 1836.

<sup>60</sup> *Two discourses preached in the U. F. Church, Infirmary Street, on the occasion of the Death of the Rev. John Ritchie D.D. in the forenoon by the Rev. William Bruce, Edinburgh, in the afternoon by the Rev. Dr. Bruce, Newmilns. Printed by request* (Edinburgh, 1861), 26-7.

<sup>61</sup> J. Ritchie, *A Discourse suggested by the demise of King George the Fourth and preached in Potterrow Church by John Ritchie D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1830).

Andrew Thomson's leadership of Christian thought through his long editorship of the *Christian Instructor*, provided a solid base on which to build the outstanding contribution which he made to the cause of abolition in the last few months of his life. The *Instructor* could and did engage with this, and many other issues at the highest level of educated society. It would be no surprise to find the leading Evangelical churchman in Scotland making a long speech on slavery which combined biblical and theological scholarship with passion. What perhaps was surprising in the 1830 meetings was Thomson's uncompromising radicalism in the cause of humanity, and the political skill and knowledge that accompanied it. Duncan Rice has claimed that Andrew Thomson "changed the course of the British anti-slavery movement by taking an immediatist position in 1830"<sup>62</sup> and that the speech of 19 October 1830 became "a standard work in British and American anti-slavery libraries".<sup>63</sup> David Brion Davis has recently written that there was a confluence between American Enlightenment and Evangelical Protestantism on slavery which laid a strong emphasis on benevolence and gravitated "towards a humanitarian and reformist criteria for interpreting God's law".<sup>64</sup> If that was so then the second of Duncan Rice's claims may well have played a significant part in that process.

John Ritchie was never able to reach the heights of oratory or analytical argument any more than he was able to show the social skills to engage at a deep level with his opponents. This latter quality comes through when we compare the two men in relation to the campaign in Scotland to abolish slavery. Nonetheless over the years Ritchie's contribution was outstanding in its very doggedness, willing to shoulder the tasks, working within his denomination, not always with tact, but with persistence and with spectacular results, as we have seen. On the broader front there is no one who can claim such long service to the cause of abolition in Edinburgh, the city which bore the major burden of work for that cause in Scotland until 1833.

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<sup>62</sup> Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> C. Duncan Rice, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1975), 255.

<sup>64</sup> D. B. Davis, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass, 2003), 55-6.

If Andrew Thomson is celebrated as the leading abolitionist spokesman in the land during that crucial year, and the pacesetter for the anti-slavery movement, John Ritchie must be equally celebrated for the work and commitment that enabled Scotland to take such a lead in hastening the end, in part at least, of one of the greatest crimes in human history.

*South Queensferry*

